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Hard Times for Neutralists

FROM A CORRESPONDENT LATELY IN LAOS

PRINCE SOUVANNA PHOUMA'S return from Europe to Laos last week presents a last fragile hope of a political settlement. The truth is that there is little positive enthusiasm for a coalition government--both sides are only considering a "neutralist" regime because they have nearly abandoned hope of achieving what they want by military means. The Pathet Lao have long known that the Americans would never allow them a complete military victory in Laos since this would not only have a shattering effect on Siamese morale but would make the reinforcement and supply of the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam much easier. Hence the Pathet Lao have consistently supported the idea of a Souvanna government, even though they would have only a quarter of the cabinet positions.

The Pathet Lao have another reason for their seeming moderation. They know that they are infinitely better organised, politically speaking, than their neutralist allies. At a recent ceasefire anniversary celebration in the Plain des Jarres a meeting was addressed jointly by Pheng Phoungsavan, deputy to Prince Souvannan, and by Nounhak, the chief Pathet Lao liaison officer at the neutralist capital of Khang Khay. The largest meeting hall holds only 500 people, all of whom dutifully applauded both the moderate phrases of Pheng Phoungsavan, and the speech of Nounhak, which sounded like a Radio Peking commentary. The significant point was that the audience was heard only by his immediate audience, while copies of the Pathet Lao speech were at once distributed in the surrounding towns. In the neutralist advanced Plain des Jarres there is at least one Chinese communist bookshop, and bright Lycee students who might once have gone to Paris now go to Hanoi.

The young neutralist commanders, whose ranks look smart and well-disciplined, insist that they are not communists, or even fellow-travellers. They point out that they derive all their military supplies, and even food, from communist sources; how, then can they refuse to accept, say, Vietnamese teachers? They claim, apparently with justification, that their army is entirely loyal to Prince Souvanna; but they agree that the longer coalition is delayed, the more likely they are to be merged with the Pathet Lao. Should full-scale civil war be resumed, some of the neutralists' political leaders would go into exile, but their army would fight against General Phoumi.

Looking ahead, the neutralists claim that most of the Pathet Lao rank and file are Lao first and foremost, and that communist ideology is naturally repugnant to the Lao temperament. The neutralists claim undeclared allies among some of the Vietnamese politicians, who are keeping as aloof as they can from the Phoumi-Boun Oum regime. Together, these young men say, they could prevent the country going communist, though they would, of course, be quite happy to have diplomatic relations with Hanoi and Peking, as with neighbouring Cambodia.

According to this optimistic theory, the American "best weapon," once a coalition were formed, would be not its four right-wing nominated members of the government, but the giving of financial aid, on the condition that it not be given over by the communists. Prince Souvannavong, the Pathet Lao leader, has said he does not believe America will do such a thing.

He said that most observers do not accept this rosy view. Chances of seeing a communist take over for more than a year are perhaps only fifty-fifty. The Pathet Lao grass-roots organisation is good; almost certainly they would do well in election. One of the conditions of entering a coalition would perhaps be the postponement of elections for some considerable time.

All this, however, is somewhat hypothetical. General Phoumi is still hoping to persuade the Americans to intervene militarily in the civil war. The official American view is that, quite apart from the political considerations, military intervention in Laos would inevitably lead to counter-action by the Chinese and North Vietnamese. They also know that the fighting which preceded the dramatic collapse of the royalist forces at Nani Tha was in fact provoked by General Phoumi. Nevertheless, discipline among the various kinds of American representatives and advisers in Vietnam, though better than a year ago, is still poor, and General Phoumi knows that he has many secret sympathisers in the Central Intelligence Agency and among American military personnel.

When the Americans first tried, in January, to get the Vietnamese government to enter a coalition on terms acceptable to Prince Souvanna and the Pathet Lao, they cut off the economic aid of \$3 million a month, but they continued military aid and the members of their "White Star" team, who in fact, if not in theory, took part in actual fighting. Thus General Phoumi was not inclined to take the economic sanctions too seriously, for quite rightly,

He knows that he himself and the foreign minister, Kham-Panya, are the only members of the Vietnamese government to be unacceptable not only to the Pathet Lao but also to the neutralists. Even if, for form's sake, he were given an official position in a coalition government, his personal authority would be gone for ever. It is therefore unlikely that General Phoumi will cease all attempts to force him into a coalition, proceeding to go into exile if that becomes necessary, but if Peking, he is the last moment the Americans have cold feet, drop the Harriman policy and resume full-scale bombing for the Vietnamese regime.

Prospects for a Laos settlement, therefore, are not very bright. The partition suggestion made by Snaird, Dado is quite unavoidable. Each side has pockets of influence within the territory generally controlled by the other. No artificial land frontier can possibly be devised in so mountainous and wooded a country. Coalition negotiations should break down; time is on the side of the Pathet Lao. The neutralists in the middle will be squeezed out. Anyone who has been able to contrast the cynical racism of Vientiane with the dedicated Panatism of the Pathet Lao can have no doubt of the eventual outcome. Only an aggressive American intervention, with its incalculable consequences, could restore the balance; and even then, nothing short of full-scale military intervention could prevent the reversal of Pathet Lao activity. Thus the West should spare no effort to save the negotiations and to be calculating till of a coalition government, and to do so before the US fails to calculate that the Pathet Lao will be the best weapon.